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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001477

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2021

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [ADANA](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ATTACK ON CATHOLIC CLERGY AMID ANTI-CATHOLIC PUBLIC CRITICISM

REF: ANKARA 522

(U) Classified by DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This message is from AmConsulate Adana.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: A Catholic friar and several other church members were attacked on March 11 in the Mersin Catholic church by a Turkish man wielding a knife and yelling anti-Christian epithets. No one was injured. Catholic contacts told us that Catholic clergy feel targeted, and assert that the police believe that there is a broader effort afoot to attack clergy in Anatolia. A recent exchange of combative letters in local newspapers between the Iskenderun mayor and the Catholic Archbishop for Anatolia is indicative of the hostile relationship between local authorities and Catholics. The attack follows a February murder of a Catholic priest in Trabzon (reftel). End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) An AmCit nun who is secretary to the Bishop of the Catholic Church in Iskenderun, in southern Turkey, told Consulate Adana Principal Officer (PO) on March 14 about the attack by a young Turkish man on a Catholic friar and several other church members, including children practicing a passion play. During the attack, which she said lasted 30 minutes, the man yelled anti-Christian epithets and accused the priests of maintaining a brothel in the church. The other clergy in the church called the police, who came and arrested the young man. Contacts at the Mersin Catholic church told us on March 14 that the Mersin Prosecutor released the alleged assailant the day after his arrest.

Clergy Feels Targeted

¶4. (C) In a March 2 conversation with Adana PO, Iskenderun-based Catholic Archbishop for Anatolia Monsignor Luigi Padovese said that Catholic clergy feel targeted. The Archbishop said that the Iskenderun Deputy Governor and Turkish National Police (TNP) were being supportive, but that he was being vilified in the Iskenderun press by Iskenderun Mayor Mete Arslan. (Note: Arslan, a mid-1990's International Visitor Program participant, was elected from the center-right Motherland Party (ANAP), but holds ultranationalist views. He is widely considered in Iskenderun to be jockeying for a future parliamentary seat. End note.) The Archbishop claimed that the TNP believed a broader effort was afoot to target and attack clergy in Anatolia and had assigned him and other prominent clergy police protection. The Bishop asserted that the TNP told him they had intercepted faxes among different members of a Turkey-wide conspiracy which was targeting Catholic clergy. As a result, the TNP had offered the Bishop police protective details, which he has started using, although he complains that it isolates him from his community and violates his privacy.

Hostile Tone Characterizes Public Criticism of Catholics

¶5. (SBU) In a February 14 press statement published in Olay newspaper, a local Iskenderun daily, Mayor Arslan said, "The world is becoming smaller and people are getting closer to each other. But, while we are getting closer to people we are very openly distanced from them culturally. The most sacred position of the people is their religion. But, there are some ill-intentioned people who would like to demolish our values.⁸ The mayor, who openly opposes Turkey's EU accession, went on to imply that the EU threatens Turkey's traditional respect for all religious faiths, and said that &there was no problem (with religious intolerance) in Turkey prior to the EU (process).⁸ The mayor then referred to the February murder of a Catholic priest in the city of Trabzon, mistakenly stating that &while there is not one single Catholic in Trabzon, there is a Catholic church there. It appears that someone intends to sell snails in a Muslim quarter (i.e., stir up trouble).⁸

¶6. (SBU) Archbishop Padovese's response to Arslan was published in the February 16 Olay. Padovese described the Catholic Church's service in Trabzon, claimed the mayor was unaware of the facts, and said the mayor had made baseless accusations against Christians.

¶7. (SBU) Mayor Arslan replied in a rambling February 23

article in another Iskenderun daily. Arslan called Padovese's letter reproachful and insulting, claimed he had condemned the Trabzon murder, and accused Christians of double standards with respect to alleged mistreatment of Muslims in Iraq, Bosnia, and other parts of Europe.

¶8. (C) The Archbishop said the exchange of letters with the mayor disturbed him because what the Archbishop perceived as the mayor's "casual" mention of the killing of the priest created a public environment in which the use of violence was made more acceptable.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) The attack against the friar occurs against the backdrop of the February murder of a Catholic priest in Trabzon. While Turks generally responded to the Prophet Mohammed cartoons with peaceful protests, in contrast to many of their Muslim neighbors, a fear of Christianity) which they see as representing the West - lurks beneath the surface for many.

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